

Homily for the 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Beginning this week, and then for the following four weeks, our Gospel readings will be taken from the sixth chapter of John, often referred to as the “Bread of Life Discourse”, because Jesus speaks all about the “bread from heaven”. Five weeks all about this topic! And even the liturgical books that help us priests prepare for Mass tell us to be careful not to say everything you know about the Eucharist on the first week, ‘cause you got four more to go! It also mentions that this is a good occasion to offer a series of homilies about the Mass. I really like idea – so, I’d we’ll be doing that for the next several weeks – taking a nice slow walk through this greatest of prayers we call the Mass, and talk about *some* of what goes on and why.

I guess the place to start is simply with coming to Mass. In today’s Gospel, a large crowd followed Jesus all the way across the Sea of Galilee “because they saw the signs he was performing on the sick.” Now, this was a large, HUNGRY crowd. And it was time to eat. In reference to the Mass, this is probably the first point: We have to come. Just like those hungry people, we are so hungry for all that God alone can offer us. And Jesus has so much to offer us at Mass – but we must come to Him in order to receive what He wants to give us. Thus, the obligation attached to come to Mass every Sunday, and on holy days of obligation too.

And how do we come to Mass? In one word – prepared. It can be a challenge for us to prepare ourselves for what we’re about to do in the Mass – sometimes, we think ourselves lucky just to be on time. But the Church, as our Mother, reminds us of the importance of taking some time before Mass begins for personal prayer, reflection and getting ready to give worship to our God, and receive all the graces that He desires to give us. Preparation also means that we’ve fasted for one hour from food as a way of increasing our hunger for the Eucharist. It means that we should dress appropriately too, as if we’re going someplace really important – because we are! Yes, come as you are, because Jesus loves you just as you are. But what *we* wear says more about our attitude towards Jesus, not His view of us! And speaking of our attitude, if we come here to be entertained and are disappointed because we “don’t get anything out of it”, we have to remember that we’re here not so much to get but to give – to give back in praise to our God for all that He has given us!

So, how do we begin Mass? By singing. Sometimes we fail to recognize the importance of singing, or think if I don’t have a good voice, I’ll just opt out. But actually, the Opening Hymn that we sing is meant to draw us together, and unite us. For this reason, everyone is invited to sing. God gave you whatever voice you have – give it to Him back! Also, the music during Mass is often specifically chosen to reflect the themes that will emerge in the Scripture readings. And remember St. Augustine’s adage: “The one who sings, prays twice.”

OK, enough introduction and background, let's walk through the Mass one part at a time. Don't worry, we're not doing the *entire* Mass today – remember, we have 5 weeks! Now, when you see the priest walking up the aisle, you notice that I'm not wearing every day street clothes. Instead, I'm wearing **vestments**, which help us to realize that Mass isn't like any other gathering we might attend, like school, a party, or a conference. The vestments include:

Alb – The word alb simply means “white”, and refers to the white robe worn. It's a reminder that the blood of Jesus first washed us clean of the stain of sin at baptism, and made us white as snow in purity.

Stole – The stole is a symbol of authority. God has given His priests the authority to minister in the name of His Son.

Chasuble – Chasuble comes from the same root as “casa”, which means house. By the priest wearing a “house” on his shoulders, it symbolizes his role as the spiritual father of the family of God, which is the Church.

Now, as the procession arrived in the sanctuary, which is the holy area in the front of the church, several pieces of “furniture” come into focus. They are:

Pulpit – The Bible readings, also called the Scripture readings or the Word of God, are proclaimed from the pulpit.

Tabernacle – Tabernacle comes from the Latin words for “tent” – meaning a dwelling place. God first dwelt among the Israelites in the Ark of the Covenant in a tent, then in the temple of Jerusalem, then in Jesus Christ himself. Now, Jesus dwells among us in the Eucharist, which is housed in the tabernacle here in the church.

Presider’s Chair – where God’s ordained priest leads the assembly of believers.

Altar – Upon the altar, the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ is made present. In Old Testament times, lambs and other animals were sacrificed on altars for the forgiveness of people’s sins. For us as Christians, the altar is now a symbol of the cross, where the Lamb of God was sacrificed, once and for all, for our sins. That’s why I kiss, or reverence the altar, too, during the Entrance Hymn.

Then, after the priest arrives to the presider’s chair, we begin the **Introductory Rites** with the **Sign of the Cross**. We begin our worship of God by naming who we’re worshipping. The one true God is a Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It’s like addressing who we’re going to talk to.

After the greeting with ritual words to say, “welcome everyone, get ready”, we move on to the **Penitential Act**. At Mass, we have come together to worship God. However, both among ourselves, and in our relationship with God, all manner of stuff can be in our way. We call this stuff, sin. But, so that nothing would keep us from entering fully into the Eucharistic celebration, we first ask forgiveness. P.S. the Penitential Act does not replace Confession (Reconciliation) by which we receive God’s definitive, sacramental forgiveness, which is needed before the reception of Holy Communion in the case of serious, mortal sin.

After this, we move on to the **Gloria** – a hymn of praise meant to express what our hearts are experiencing at this point in the Mass – joy and praise. Because we have just asked Jesus to forgive us our sins, as we prayed for in the Penitential Act, we now glorify God for what he has done – forgiven us our sins in Christ.

This leads us to the **Opening Prayer**, also called the “collect”. In this prayer, the priest collects all the prayers of the people and gives voice to them in one unified prayer – that’s why I pause a little bit after saying, “Let us pray.” The prayers are prescribed for each Sunday, Feast and Holyday. And they are found in the Roman Missal (the large red book used by the priest), and many of them date to the earliest centuries of the church.

So, here ends our lesson today on this first part of the Mass – the Introductory Rites. As we continue the Bread of Life Discourse next week, we’ll explore the part of the Mass called the Liturgy of the Word. God bless you.